

Date: June 1, 2019

Author: Robert Rosenthal

Category: Commissioned Essay

Narrative

General Note: This narrative will attempt something inherently difficult: to speak to a group of interested readers ranging from those who have never heard of *A Course in Miracles* to those who have studied the material for many years.

"This is a Course in Miracles. Please take notes."

Imagine that you are a highly-respected research psychologist at a prestigious academic institution. However, you're stuck in your own "No Exit" hell: an intensely demanding work environment and a tempestuous relationship with your boss—with whom you happen to be in love—although he doesn't share your feelings. You also happen to be married. The bickering between the two of you is constant and wearying. Then one day, out of the blue, he launches into a diatribe about how negative both of your attitudes are, concluding that "there must be another way." Without a second's hesitation, and much to his surprise and yours, you find yourself agreeing and promising to help him find that way. Shortly thereafter, an inner voice instructs you, "This is a Course in Miracles. Please take notes."

When Dr. Helen Schucman, a 56 year-old, atheistic psychologist at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York heard this in 1965, she feared she was going insane. Instead of confiding in her husband, she reached out in a panic to her boss, Bill Thetford, Associate Professor of Medical Psychology. He calmly suggested that she consider doing exactly what this voice asked; take notes. They could review them together in the morning before work and assess both their value and her state of mind. If the notes turned out to be psychotic gibberish, they could toss them and get her some help, with no one the wiser. Helen wrote on that first night:

This is a course in miracles. It is a required course. Only the time you take it is voluntary. Free will does not mean that you can establish the curriculum. It means only that you can elect what you want to take at a given time. The course does not aim at teaching the meaning of love, for that is beyond what can be taught. It does aim, however, at removing the blocks to the awareness of love's presence, which is your natural inheritance. The opposite of love is fear, but what is all-encompassing can have no opposite. This course can therefore be summed up very simply in this way:

*Nothing real can be
threatened, Nothing unreal
exists.
Herein lies the peace of
God.*

The next morning, Helen shared this with Bill. He assured her that she was not going crazy and that they would keep this to themselves. He proposed that if the Voice happened to speak to her again, she bring him her notes and he would type them up for review. At the end of ten days, Bill had typed fourteen pages.

Helen and Bill were hardly your run-of-mill psychologists. At the time Helen began hearing her Voice, she was a statistician without rival. Bill was co-editor of the prestigious *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*. What is less well known is their background prior to the Course.

In 1951 Bill began to work with John Gittinger to develop the Personality Assessment System (PAS). In 1958 Helen joined him. The PAS was designed to codify the process by which every human being constructs their sense of self: that is, a personality. By 1962 the PAS achieved a level of descriptive and predictive accuracy that far exceeded anything in existence at the time, eclipsing the theories of other, better-known systems such as Freud's or Erik Erickson's. The irony here is that Bill and Helen helped craft a tool for measuring the key attributes of the concept of self, or the ego, and then went on to take down *A Course in Miracles*, one of the goals of which is the unseating of ego and the reinstatement of Spirit as the heart of the self-concept.

In a small room behind Bill's office, Helen and Bill continued to meet together secretly *over the next seven years* to review the notes dictated to her by the Voice. Given the nature of the material, the obvious inference was that the Voice could only be that of Jesus. However, Helen rarely admitted to this and only referred to it as "the Voice". The final result of their collaboration was a profound metaphysical thought system in three volumes titled *A Course in Miracles*. It consisted of a Text of 867 typed pages, a Workbook for Students containing 365 lessons, one for each day of the year, and a slimmer Manual for Teachers.

Helen and Bill had no idea what to do with this massive volume, but Bill had the strong sense that it could be helpful to many people. He shared the manuscript with four people he trusted, including a Capuchin friar, Father Ben, whom he was supervising for a doctoral thesis. Father Ben made Bill aware of a paper by a young psychologist named Kenneth Wapnick, in which Wapnick disputed the common wisdom that mysticism was merely another form of schizophrenia. Father Ben introduced Bill to Kenneth and in a short time Kenneth realized that his life's work lay with the *Course*.

In Helen's initial scribing of the Voice's dictation, she received a great deal of information relating to herself, Bill, and topics of interest to them. At times, she would overrule the Voice, substituting her own words, only to reverse herself later. Therefore, she made many transcription errors, particularly in the first hundred pages or so of the Text. As the work progressed and Helen grew more proficient in and comfortable with the dictation process, these errors and Helen's editing grew far less frequent. Kenneth essentially took over Bill's role in supporting Helen in cleaning up the material to the Voice's satisfaction. He remained deeply involved with the Course right up to his death in 2013.

Helen, Bill and Ken generally kept the Course to themselves, with no idea what to do with the material. At a lunch in May of 1975, Helen and Bill were introduced by a colleague to Judith Skutch. For reasons she still cannot explain, and completely out of context with the conversation, Judy turned to Helen and said, "So, you're hearing an inner voice, aren't you?" Helen was stunned but Bill just chuckled, then brought Judy to their office, where she met Kenneth Wapnick and saw for the first time the seven large black thesis binders that contained the manuscript of the Course. Helen, Bill,

Ken, and Judy—the four principals who brought *A Course in Miracles* to the world and who constituted its inner circle—were for the first time united. They set out to study the Course together, meeting almost daily over the next few years.

In 1972, prior to her introduction to the Course, Judy had founded (along with then-husband, Robert Skutch) a non-profit organization called the Foundation for Parapsychological Investigation, devoted to funding research in parapsychology. As a result, she was already well connected in the fields of humanistic and transpersonal psychology, and she avidly shared with her community an early, paperbound printing of the Course. It was more than well-received. As demand for the Course skyrocketed, there arose the first inkling that perhaps it should be published. But how?

The four principals had settled on a decision-making process (still practiced today by the Executive Committee of the Foundation for Inner Peace) in which they would formulate their question, close their eyes, ask for guidance, and then wait to hear an answer—a process in alignment with the Course's teachings. They had received offers to publish from three major New York houses as well as from a friend of Judy's who ran a small, non-profit press devoted exclusively to spiritual subject matters. Yet when they “asked” about these, the Voice replied “no” to them all. They reframed the question and instead asked, “Who is supposed to publish *A Course in Miracles*?” All four received basically the same inner answer: “Only those who will do this and only this the rest of their lives. Only those who would put it in a non-profit organization to make copies available for those who could not afford them. Only those who would keep it intact and not change anything in the material.” Apparently, they were to publish it themselves. But where would the funding come from? Again they asked, and were told, “Trust. It will be there.” Judy specifically heard, “Make the commitment first.” So they did.

The very next morning Judy received a call from a man in Mexico whose name she didn't recognize, but who claimed he had met her once before. This man had received a copy of the Course and was so taken by it that he insisted it be published immediately. She replied that that was indeed their intention, but they lacked funding. He told her that was precisely the reason for his call. He had just sold a piece of land and had already mailed out a check for \$60,000 to cover the cost of the first printing. And so, *A Course in Miracles* made its way into the world.

Following the guidance of the Voice, in 1976 Judy changed the name of her non-profit to The Foundation for Inner Peace, because inner peace is one of the central goals of the Course's curriculum. This new foundation's purpose, as assigned by the Voice, was “to publish, distribute and discuss” *A Course in Miracles*. It has remained true to its mission to this day (along with its sister organization, Kenneth Wapnick's Foundation for A Course in Miracles).

Since its inception in 1976, when the first hard-bound edition of the Course was released, the Foundation for Inner Peace (FIP) has printed approximately three million copies of *A Course in Miracles* (ACIM). This includes translations into twenty-seven different languages (with more in the pipeline). Those who cannot afford it are given a scholarship copy. Thousands of independent, autonomous study groups have sprung up around the globe. FIP does not advertise or proselytize;

both the study groups and the translations have come about organically due to the initiative of students.

A Course in Miracle has sold 30,000 to 40,000 print copies per year in English for the past thirty-five years; unheard of numbers in the publishing world, especially given that FIP does not advertise. These numbers testify to ACIM's staying power and to its profound impact on the lives of its students. FIP's website registered 37 million hits in the past year with over 750,000 unique visitors. FIP's main Facebook page has garnered 211,000 "likes"; there are hundreds of other independent Facebook groups and pages devoted to the Course as well. The Course has inspired over 400 related books which expound upon its ideas—many of them bestsellers—and thirty-five apps to help students study its lessons. It has influenced some of the most prominent voices in the human potential/self-help movement including Eckhart Tolle, Wayne Dyer, Marianne Williamson, and Deepak Chopra. In a 2016 scholarly work by a U.C. Santa Barbara professor, the Course was deemed to be a prominent spiritual movement, included alongside Mormonism and Alcoholics Anonymous as one of the leading revelatory texts of our time. The Course's foundational statement—"Nothing real can be threatened, nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God"—was recently incorporated into song lyrics by Beyoncé and J.Z. Clearly, the Course's penetration into popular culture, and a far wider audience, is just beginning.

You might reasonably ask, what is it about *A Course in Miracles* and its message that makes it so powerful and enduring? Shortly before Helen, Bill, Ken, and Judy sat down with Mother Teresa back in 1977, Helen had asked her Voice, "Why is *A Course in Miracles* being given at this time?" The answer she received was, "Because never before have so many people been calling out for help, and this Course is an answer." That crying out has not ceased. As Judith Skutch Whitson, the last of the four original founders still alive, so sagely puts it, **"All of us have been taught, no matter the religious tradition, that our primary goal in this life on earth is to love one another. *A Course in Miracles* shows us how to do that."**

It is not possible to convey the beauty and (at times) confounding complexity of the Course's language and idea structure here, much less demonstrate the rapid mind change brought about by its Workbook lessons. However, a summary of the Course's intention might read as follows:

A Course in Miracles is a unique spiritual self-study program—a course in mind-training—designed to undo the illusion that we are separate in any way from God or our fellow humans. All of us, collectively, at the level of the mind, constitute the "Son of God." When we learn to live this insight fully, fear disappears, making way for an ongoing awareness of love's presence and the profound sense of inner peace that accompanies it. The Course achieves this goal by gently undermining our false belief in separateness through the practice of forgiveness (the healing of relationships), the willingness to receive and follow higher guidance, and the cultivation of miracle-mindedness.

The Course redefines traditional Christian terms such as sin and atonement. Sin is merely insanity, a mind deluded into dreaming a dream of separation. It is merely an incorrect notion of who we are and who everyone else is. As such, it does not require punishment, but correction. "Atonement" is the name given by the Course for that corrective process. Atonement proceeds through forgiveness, in

which we are willing to free our relationships from the past—its hurts and its highs—and return them to a greater oneness. Forgiveness requires a willingness to release *our* ideas about what they're for and turn them over to the guidance of a higher power, which the Course calls Holy Spirit. Miracles are the synchronistic events and epiphanies that naturally come about as we undertake this process of extending love through forgiveness.

In keeping with the procedure for “asking” first established by Bill, Helen, Ken, and Judy in 1976, all of the Foundation for Inner Peace’s work directly reflects the guidance of Spirit. At this time, the Foundation is in transition and its guidance is to seek funding for the next stage of its mission to publish, distribute, and discuss the Course. In a simple phrase, the Foundation has been guided to ring the bell of *A Course in Miracles* louder throughout the world.